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ABSTRACT

Designed for elementary and secondary school library media personnel, this fact sheet briefly outlines the need for and methods of public relations. The document emphasizes that because library media programs are vulnerable to budget cuts, the need exists to educate those making fiscal decisions on the role of these materials in the curriculum. A 5-step guide for communicating information is outlined: (1) determine who sends the message; (2) decide the content of the message; (3) identify the audience; (4) seek vehicles for communication; and (5) determine the objective of the message and methods to evaluate its effectiveness. A list of reference materials on public relations is provided. (KC)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SCHOOL MEDIA PROGRAMS

An ERIC Fact Sheet

Aug81

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Syracuse, N.Y.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR SCHOOL MEDIA PROGRAMS

A fact sheet published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources for school library media personnel who want guidance for promoting their programs.

What is public relations?

For the school library media specialist, public relations may be as simple as a response to a parent's telephone request for recommended reading at home or as complex as a well-planned and highly organized campaign to help the public understand the role of the school media program. Public relations occurs on a one-to-one basis as well as being directed to specific audiences and to the population in general. A more formal definition is given by the National School Public Relations Association (1969): "Educational public relations is a planned and systematic two-way process of communication between an educational organization and its internal and external publics. Its program serves to stimulate better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization" (p. 3). For the school library media program, this definition implies the sending and receiving of information between individuals who serve on the staff of the program and individuals who work within the school system and those who are outside of the schools. Public relations involves listening as well as sending; it attempts to interpret the unique contributions made by the school media program to individuals who might otherwise not fully understand the function and role of the program in the school setting.

Why public relations?

It seems that many programs in education are attempting to survive in a time of severe budget limitations. The school library media program is often one of the first programs to be questioned and is vulnerable to the budget cuts which now affect most programs within education. Very often fiscal restraints are placed on school library media programs because they are not fully understood by those who make fiscal decisions. In some communities, the public is asked to vote separately on issues regarding acquisition of new print and non-print materials. Without sufficient understanding of the role of these materials in the curriculum, negative votes often predominate. School library media programs are more recent additions to the school program than some of the more traditional support services. Therefore, the program needs to be interpreted for those who have not experienced themselves the values which stem from such programs. Stated simply, public relations is a means to survival; it offers the opportunity to stimulate public interest and to encourage the lay involvement which usually brings about acceptance.

How to do public relations.

Harold Lasswell, the great political philosopher from Yale University, coined a "formula" for communication many decades ago. He said that most communication events needed to consider five questions:

- Who
- Says what
- To whom
- Through which channels
- With what effect

The Lasswell Formula has been used as a practical guide for communicating information to many audiences and as a scheme for doing communication research. It is used in this fact sheet as a guideline for school media specialists who seek guidance in performing public relations functions. Follow the steps and the chances of success will be enhanced.

- **Who?** The first step is to ask: Who is sending the message? If you are the sender, does your audience know who you are? What is your credibility with the person or audience you are trying to reach? If the public relations responsibility is delegated to someone on your staff, you need to know how well that person might be accepted by the intended receiver. There is some research which indicates that a message is believed and understood depending upon the credibility of the communicator. Assess your status as a recognized or unrecognized communicator and act accordingly.

- **Says what?** Here we look at the content of the message. What is it you want to say to your audience? One level is concerned with general information about the school media program. This content would be used to give the audience a feel for what you are trying to do in your total program. Another level considers specific activities which you would like to highlight, such as the addition of microcomputers or the use of television with books (Chisholm and Ely, 1976, p. 278). Remember, in order to have a public relations program, you must have something worthwhile to say.

- **To whom?** Almost every person who writes about public relations stresses the need to identify your audience and to have a clear picture of who that audience is. Audiences vary from an individual person who must be reached, e.g., a school superintendent, to the public at large. AECT has published a little book on the various audiences who

n... to be reached and strategies for developing awareness among them (AECT, 1980). The audiences identified in this book are: national and state legislators, state education agency administrators, higher education administrators (presidents, deans, trustees), local administrators (superintendents, board of education, principals, curriculum supervisors), faculty members, and parents and other citizens. The only audience not suggested in this publication is the students themselves. Students are, of course, the prime focus of our efforts, but when we discuss public relations, we are addressing those who have it within their power to support the school library media program.

- Through which channels? One of the first steps often taken by individuals who begin a public relations campaign is to seek out a vehicle for communicating the message. Contacts are often made with local newspapers, radio and television stations, and store owners for placing exhibits in shops or malls. All of this effort is commendable, but ought to be done in relation to all of the other variables in the Lasswell Formula. Just as there are many criteria for selecting materials to be used in the library media center, so there are criteria for determining which medium or media should be used in communicating public relations information. Before deciding which medium to use, consider the audience to be reached, the content, the purpose, and the need for feedback. Consider local, internal newsletters and bulletin boards within the school or school system as well as the mass media which will reach external audiences in a better fashion. Remember, the research shows that information presented in multiple formats is more likely to be seen and understood; therefore, consider several means of communicating your message to your intended audience.

- With what effect? This may be the last part of the Lasswell Formula, but it is often considered first. We could say: What is your objective or purpose in communicating this information to the audience you are trying to reach? What do you want them to do, if anything, as a result of seeing and hearing your message? Can you build in means for feedback to occur? How will you evaluate the success of your effort? Public relations is probably of less value if we do not have a way to determine its effectiveness. Try to determine how you will obtain feedback for your efforts.

Resources for public relations.

A recent and comprehensive treatment for school library media public relations is found in Projecting a Positive Image Through Public Relations by Cosette Kies. This 1978 AASL publication addresses specific public relations concerns of school personnel. It is one of the few publications that deals with all aspects of the process. Mary W. Behm is editor of Practical Public Relations: Effective PR Techniques for School Library/Media Specialists. This handbook of publicity ideas suggests activities and themes to highlight services and resources of school media centers. One specific public relations event is described in Teri Goodall Dow et al., School Library Media Center Day. May 5, 1976. Material Resource File. This compilation of ideas for promoting school library media centers and for increasing the public's awareness of their multi-media educational resources can be adapted to various types of libraries as well as to classroom use.

More general references may be found in Terry Anderson's Public Relations and the Rural Library. Though the major emphasis of this bibliography is public relations in general, reference is made to titles concerned with specific ideas for establishing a public relations program for the school and public library. Public Relations. A Bibliography by Esther Perica lists 118 articles and books published between 1963 and 1976 on public relations for public, academic, school, and special librarians. There is a separate section for school libraries.

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